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Panel gives Reagan time on Nicaragua

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WASHINGTON — The Senate Intelligence Committee, meeting in a closed-door session this week, withheld action on further funding for covert aid to insurgents in Nicaragua until President Ronald Reagan addresses a joint session of Congress next Wednesday, sources said yesterday.

Though members have refused any public comment, sources confirmed that the postponement was prompted by serious opposition in the committee, which has direct authority over the annual authorization act providing funding to the CIA.

Reagan had initially asked to speak before Congress as early as tonight on the situation in Central America, but because of scheduling problems in the House the speech is now planned for 8 p.m. next Wednesday.

The appearance will mark the first time in his Administration that Reagan has sought to address Congress solely on a foreign policy issue. The speech and the delay of the Intelligence Committee vote come at a time of increased concern in both chambers over Reagan's policies in the region.

Secretary of State George P. Shultz testified yesterday afternoon before a private session of the House Intelligence Committee. Rep. Edward Boland (D-Mass.), the chairman, has scheduled a meeting again this morning, when the members may take action on the Nicaragua issue.

Shultz appeared before the committee for three hours, and while William Casey, head of the CIA, also was called to testify, the committee was not able to get to him during the late-afternoon closed session. Rep. Jim Wright (D-Tex-

as), the House majority leader, indicated Casey would probably return today to meet with the committee.

Wright said Shultz was "very open, very candid" in responding to questions. "We covered a lot of ground. The subject has been exclusively Nicaragua and Central America, what is happening there, what our people are attempting to do."

Reagan's speech before Congress next week is expected to be a defense of his policies in Nicaragua and a bid for support for more military aid to El Salvador. The aid request has run into serious opposition in Congress. Within the Democratic-controlled House, the President has yet to win any committee approval of \$110 million in military aid for this year, and on a 19-16 vote Tuesday, the House Foreign Affairs Committee rejected an effort to salvage at least \$25 million of that aid.

"We take strong exception to this action," Larry Speakes, the White House deputy press secretary, said at his daily briefing. He said it was ironic that the committee would vote against the aid given "foolproof evidence" that outside forces are supplying arms to leftists in the region.

Four Libyan planes en route to Nicaragua were discovered this week by the Brazilian government to be carrying a cargo of arms and explosives, and Speakes cited the incident in support of the Administration's concern. In an apparent reference to arms shipments from Nicaragua to El Salvador, Speakes said the shipments of arms "could well be designed to aid those who would attempt to overthrow these democratic governments."

"We think this is foolproof evidence that outside forces are continuing to supply arms to the region in an attempt to upset the reforms that have been so eagerly sought by the governments there," Speakes said.

Administration officials portrayed Reagan's speech next week as an effort to "underscore the urgency of the situation in Central America." While there is some expectation in Congress that the President may make a new initiative toward negotiations, there is no clear evidence this will happen.

Sources close to the Senate Intelligence Committee said the decision to postpone any action on Nicaragua was not linked to any promise of a concession by the Administration but was simply to give the President an opportunity to defend his policies. The committee met Tuesday to approve the annual authorization bill for 1984 and, while completing action on most of the legislation, the Nicaragua issue was put off until the President's speech.

Among Democrats on the committee, there is clearly opposition to continuing the funding. Two sources said that if a vote had occurred Tuesday on the issue, the outcome might have gone against the Administration. Other sources have said the votes are there for continued funding but, historically, the Intelligence Committees in both houses have tried to rule by consensus and avoid covert operations where there is a substantial minority in opposition.

The concern in Congress over the aid stems both from what members see as the risks in the Administration's policy and legal questions about compliance with restrictions imposed last year. An amendment bearing Boland's name was adopted in December prohibiting the use of any funds for the purpose of overthrowing the Nicaraguan government. While neither committee has faulted the CIA, there is concern that Reagan's policy of aiding the insurgents is in violation of the law.

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